

Refugee Language Needs

Current Refugee Trends in the United States,
and the Ever-growing Need for Language
Services



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A Telanguage Whitepaper



Current Refugee Trends in the United States

The United States has long accepted refugees fleeing persecution or war. From taking in hundreds of thousands of Europeans displaced by World War II, to welcoming those escaping from Communist regimes in Europe and Asia during the Cold War, the United States has helped define protections for refugees under international humanitarian law¹. Understanding the current trends of refugee influx in the United States is critically important to providing services to these unique groups of people. In 2017, nearly 54,000 refugees applied for admission into the United States² with the main groups coming from Africa and Near East South Asia. Every year, tens of thousands of refugees seek out the United States in pursuit of safety from persecution, war and natural disasters, and every year the United States provides a variety of services to support these vulnerable sets of people.

Already in 2018, over 6,700 refugees have been admitted to the United States, with the vast majority some from Africa, Europe and Near East South Asia³. That's over 140 every day. In 2016, the countries with the highest number of refugees admitted to the United States were the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Myanmar, Iraq, and Somalia, in descending order⁴. Once in the United States, where refugees settle is also important. In 2016, California, Texas, and New York took in the highest number of refugees, making up almost a quarter of all refugee admissions that year. The ten states with the highest intake resettled just over half of all refugees admitted in 2016. Only two states—Delaware and Hawaii—took in no refugees⁵.

Historically, the total number of refugees coming to the U.S. has fluctuated along with global events and U.S. priorities. From 1990 to 1995, an average of about 112,000 refugees arrived in the U.S. each year, with many coming from the former Soviet Union. However, refugee admissions dropped off to fewer than 27,000 in 2002 following the terrorist attacks in 2001⁶. This number has since trended up.

¹ Retrieved 16 February 2018 from <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/how-does-us-refugee-system-work>

² Retrieved 16 February 2018 from <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>

³ Retrieved 16 February 2018 from <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>

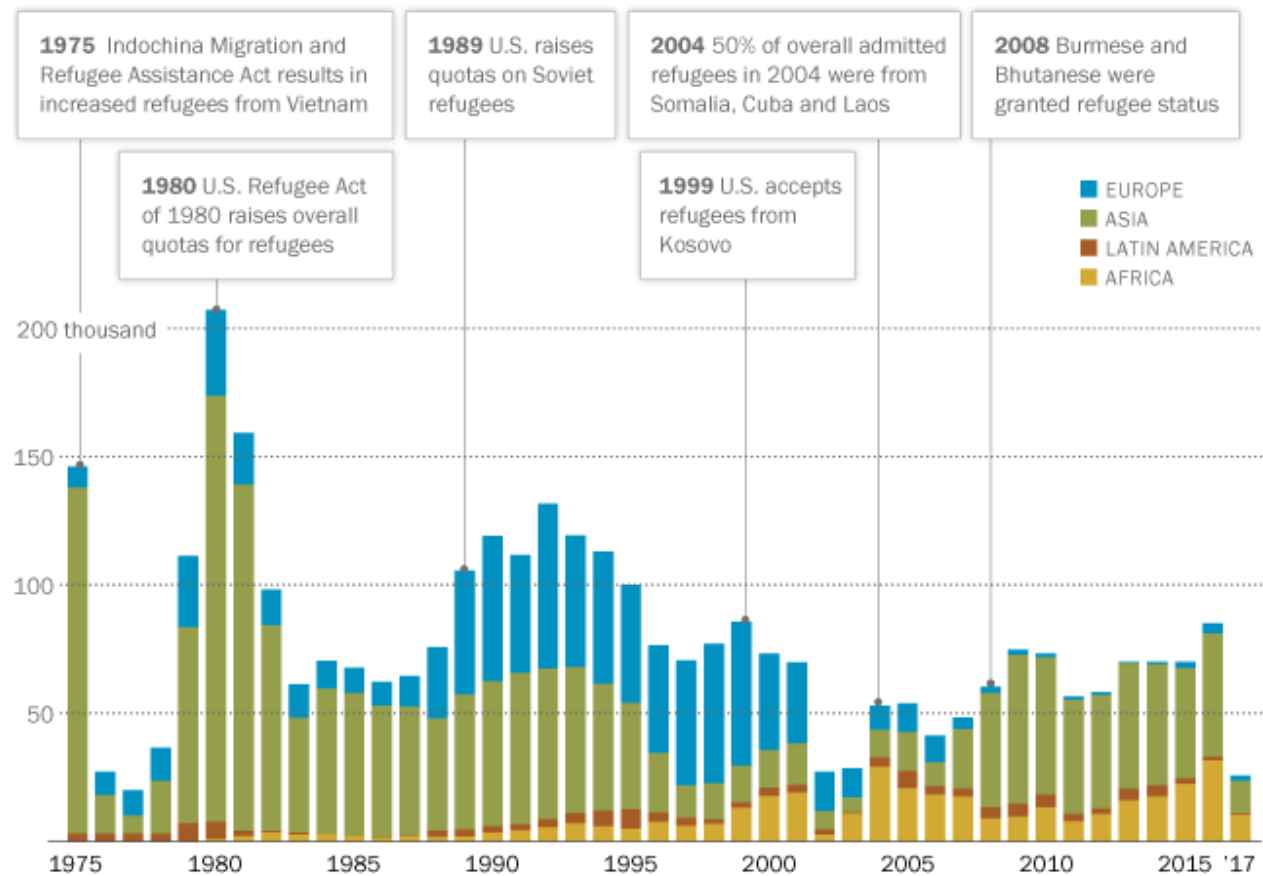
⁴ Retrieved 16 February 2018 from <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/how-does-us-refugee-system-work>

⁵ Retrieved 16 February 2018 from <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/how-does-us-refugee-system-work>

⁶ Retrieved 16 March 2018 from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/30/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/>

The shifting origins of refugees to the U.S. over time

Number of refugees admitted to the U.S., by region of origin of principal applicant and fiscal year



Source: Refugee Processing Center, 1975-2016.

Note: Data do not include special immigrant visas and certain humanitarian parole entrants. Does not include refugees admitted under the Private Sector Initiative. Europe includes former Soviet Union states. Asia includes Middle Eastern and North African countries. Africa includes sub-Saharan Africa, but also Sudan and South Sudan. Latin America includes Caribbean. Data for fiscal 2017 are through Dec. 31, 2016; fiscal 2017 began Oct. 1, 2016.

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7

⁷ Retrieved 16 March 2018 from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/30/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/>

Supporting Refugee Communities Through Language Services

Refugee communities require the same support that any other group of people would: healthcare, social services, transportation, housing, legal assistance, etc. One service that may seem obvious, but is often overlooked, is language services. Many refugees are abruptly relocated from their countries of origin and transplanted into the United States without a fluent knowledge of English. For this reason, many basic services are just out of reach without the aid of an interpreter or translator.

Because of the United States refugee placement system, some of the areas that see a spike in specific language needs may seem random. For instance, Louisville, Kentucky has a large population of Karen refugees due to military unrest in the country of Burma (Burma is still under a military regime that calls the country Myanmar). Also, Minneapolis is home to a large Somali population, and Dearborn, Michigan has a thriving Arab-American population. These are fairly large communities, but there are many smaller communities – with even less resources – that find themselves supporting foreign and distressed populations. Thankfully, due to today's technology, language resources are widely available through a host of various avenues such as hospitals, social services, Department of Human Services, Department of Family Services, and many more. Most major government agencies, healthcare facilities, and legal departments now offer language services to their clients as a supplementary service. Even industries such as utilities, housing and transportation are understanding the value in providing equal services to their clients – simply by providing language interpretation and translation support.

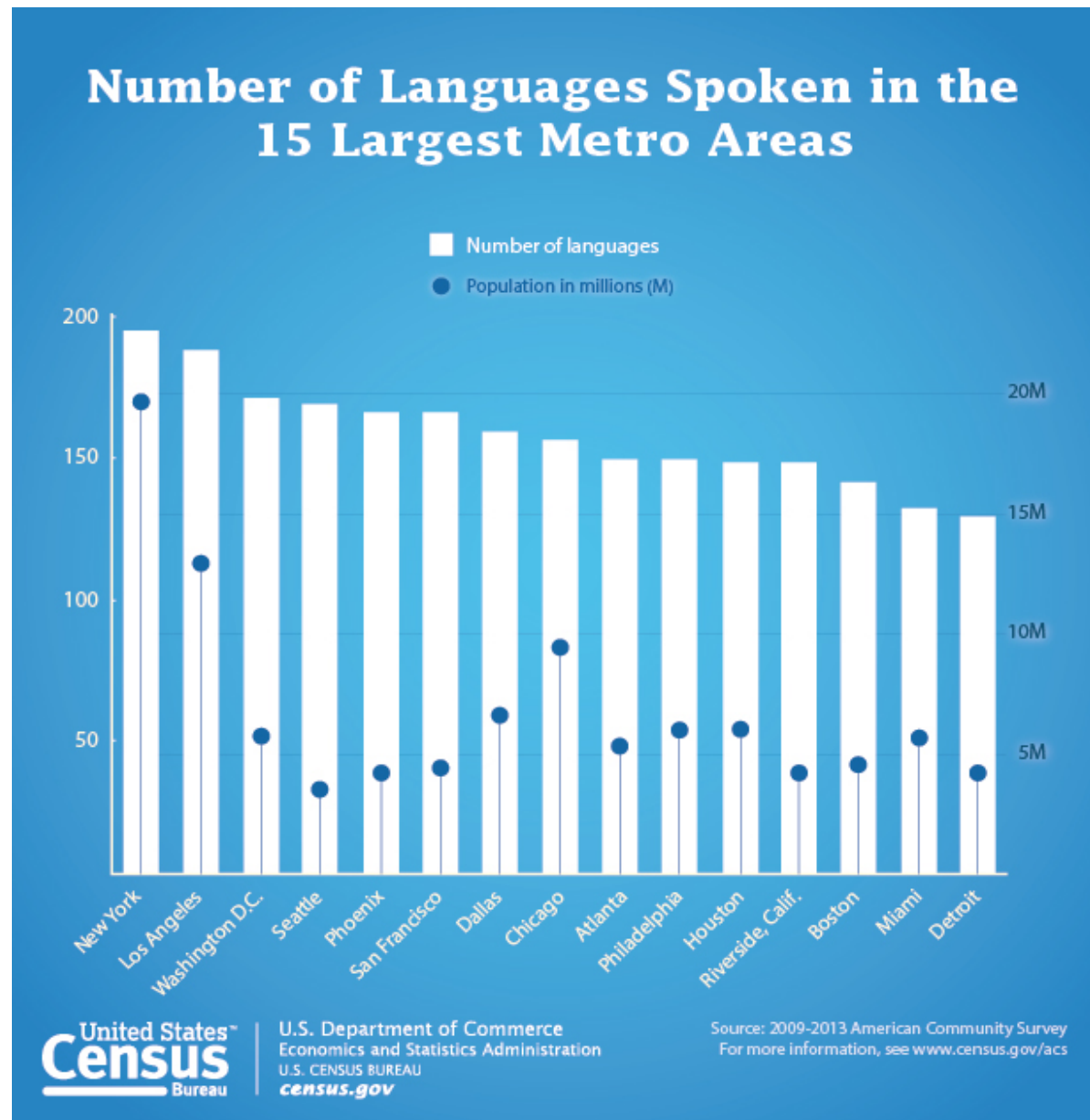
Providing Empathetic and Compassionate Support

Refugees are very specialized groups of people. They differ from traditional immigrants in that they have been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster. For these reasons, empathetic, compassionate – and professional – language service support is vital to providing a holistic and accurate interpretation. Many refugees, especially newly resettled refugees, have recently undergone one of the most challenging – and often traumatic – experiences of their lives. Language service providers are able to step in and provide a basic, and vital, connection between refugees and their new environment. Many refugees find that interpreters and translators bring a welcome sense of familiarity to unfamiliar surroundings.

Once settled in the United States, refugees are generally in the hands of charity and other volunteer agencies that specialize in resettlement. The State Department's Reception and Placement Program provides funding to go toward refugees' rent, furnishings, food, and clothing. After three months this responsibility shifts to HHS,

which provides longer-term cash and medical assistance, as well as other social services, including language classes and employment training⁸.

The number, and diversity, of language support varies greatly from city to city and region to region. The greatest language requests in Houston, for example, are predominantly Spanish; while areas like New York City and the Bay area are much more diverse in their language needs.



⁸ Retrieved 16 February 2018 from <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/how-does-us-refugee-system-work>

⁹ Retrieved on 16 March 2018 from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-185.html>

Developing Dynamic Services to Support the Future of American Diversity

Politics aside, the United States of America will continue to grow in diversity. The percentage of the U.S. population speaking a language other than English at home has nearly doubled since 1980 – now at 22%¹⁰. As the globe continues to shrink, it stands to reason that these numbers will continue to grow at an increasing speed. It is becoming vitally important – and even mandated in some industries – to provide language services to customers and clients. Many government agencies and healthcare organizations have been the first to adopt these policies in an effort to better serve their communities. While refugee trends are constantly changing, many organizations and municipalities are finding that they're seeking language service providers for the first time, as they work to navigate a new status quo.

Most everyone can imagine a sense of anxiety when thinking about being dropped into a foreign country as a non-native speaker. Many basic amenities may be difficult or impossible to obtain, and the unfamiliar might seem overwhelming. Many language service providers began with one goal in mind: to serve individuals and communities by helping them achieve the same services and care as those who speak the native language of any given country. A large number of language service business founders and employees were once interpreters, or recent immigrants or refugees themselves. One of the most basic services refugees seek is the language connection, as this precedes their pursuit of everything that follows. The United States was founded as a beacon and safe harbor for all those seeking it. Even though the world has grown more complicated, that foundation should still stand. As stated in "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."

¹⁰ Retrieved 14 February 2018 from <https://cis.org/One-Five-US-Residents-Speaks-Foreign-Language-Home-Record-618-million>